at cheap prices. Credit must be given to the Afghan women who have shouldered the responsibilities for the upbringing of their children when their men were away. They have taught their young well that taking drugs is not the way for good Muslims to behave.

During the *jihad* one would often see men coming home from the war to rest with their families in the Pakistani camps. If they were a little slow about going back to the battlefield, the women would push and shame them into doing their duty for the *jihad*. The women therefore played a vital part in the war, for it was their strength that motivated men to keep fighting.

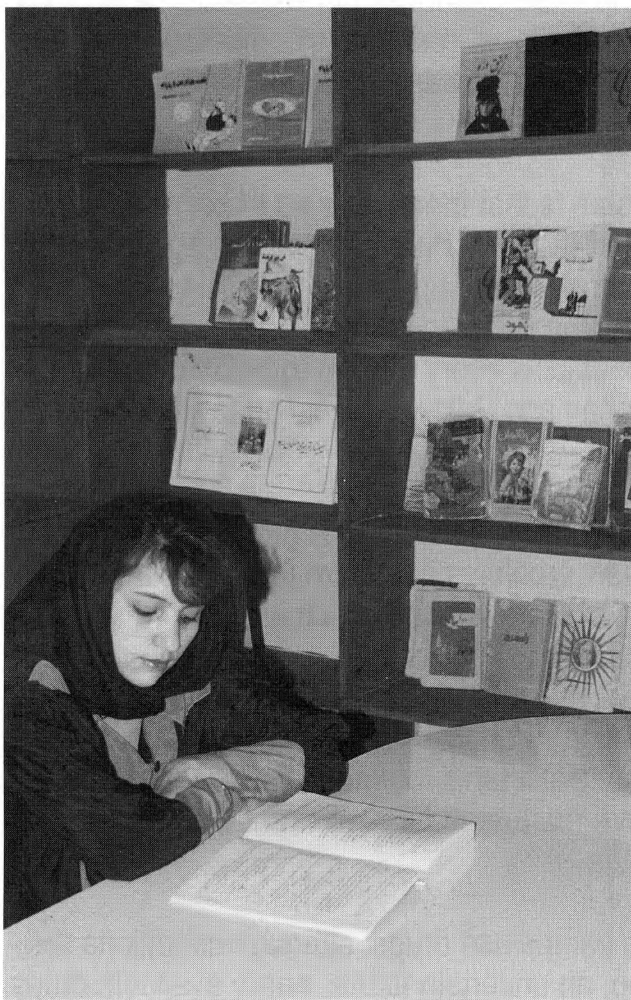
Refugee healthcare

From the very beginning, clinics were established within all the refugee camps in Pakistan. This was a novelty for many women who had never heard of healthcare before. They learned that they did not have to suffer in childbirth, that they could have pre-natal as well as post-natal care, and that both they and their children could be immunized against diseases. They learned that with basic care they need not suffer the grief of losing so many infants. This new appreciation of and dependence on healthcare is going to pose problems for any government that tries to go back to the old days when there was simply no adequate health infrastructure in the country. The women are going to demand it, because they have experienced it.


A. Hollmann, UNHCR

Baghlan, 1995

Thanks to healthcare facilities, there were no major epidemics, despite the fact that the camps were so crowded. As time went on, medical workers observed that the women were no longer spacing their children the way they did before. The refugee areas developed one of the highest birth rates anywhere in the world: 13.6 children per woman compared to the already high rate of 9.3 prior to 1978. This high fertility rate was not just among the rural women in the refugee camps. Some urban women who already had grandchildren started new families. So many men were being killed in battle, they said, that women wanted to have as many children as possible. This was considered an appropriate way for women to contribute to the *jihad*.


Peshawar, 1990s

To cut the infant mortality rates (85 per cent of deaths were from preventable diseases), preventive medical programmes were introduced and basic health workers trained to pass on simple, life-saving messages. For instance, when the children had diarrhoea, the traditional tendency was to stop giving them liquids. Very simple things like the need to keep such patients well hydrated were taught by the new basic health workers with excellent results.

Education

Education was also provided to refugee populations. Soon after my husband and I were thrown out of Afghanistan in 1979, we went to a refugee camp just north of Peshawar where I made the innocent remarks that it might be nice to have a girls' school. I was immediately accused of being a communist, an infidel, and a traitor to Afghanistan. Among the conservative groups at that time, there was a genuine feeling that education had brought communism to Afghanistan and landed them in this bad situation. Any secular school was anathema

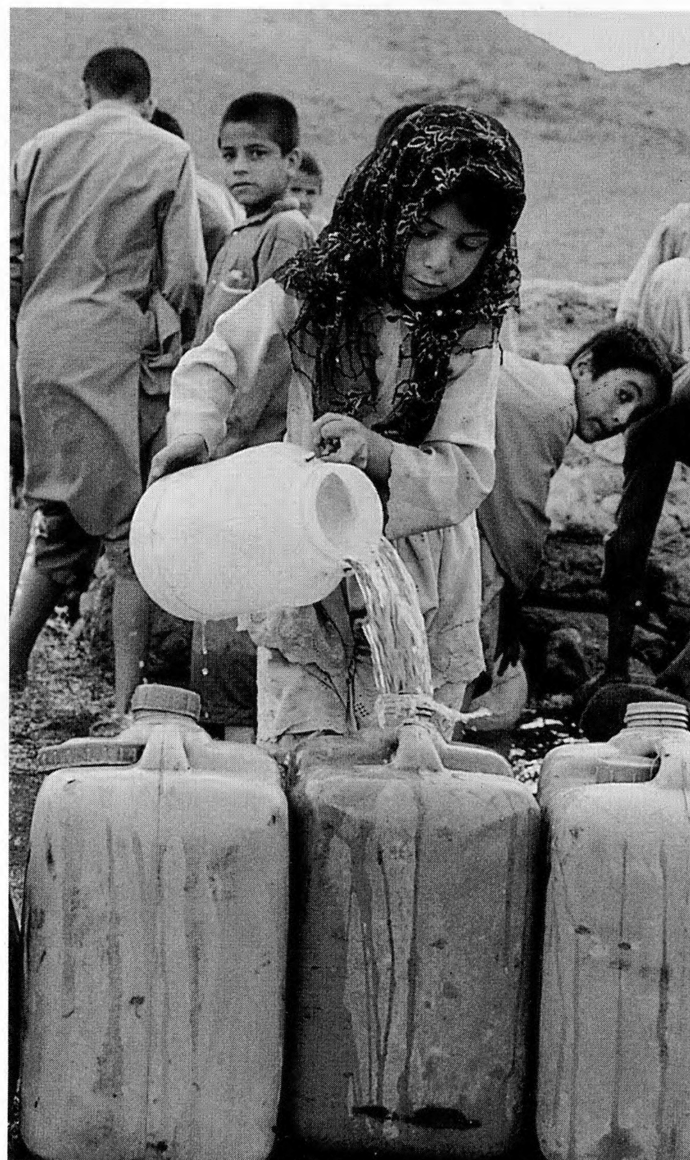
for many, and girls' schools – forget it. There were, however, some dedicated teachers in the camps, and they started to teach small groups of children. Later boys' schools and a smaller number of girls' schools were established in all the camps, supported by the UNHCR.

Nine times out of ten, girls were taken out of school when they reached puberty. Opportunities even for boys to study beyond primary levels were extremely limited. I personally believe that much primary education is a waste of time and money, unless you produce reading materials to help those children maintain their skills after they leave primary school. Children who go through primary school learn to read and write, but they do not learn why reading and writing is important. I know girls who went through primary school, but soon forgot how to read because there was nothing for them to read.

While many girls were taken out of schools by their families before completing primary school, boys would leave quite voluntarily because the manly thing to do was to join the *jihad*. When I asked the sons of some of my friends why they did not stay and at least finish high school, they told me sincerely that only the chicken-hearted stayed in school. Real men went off to fight. So now there is a whole generation of young boys who are used to nothing but living by the gun. Their answers to problems are at the end of a gun, not through reasoning or negotiation. Nor do they have the skills that are needed to become productive members of society. This is a big problem. You can not just put these boys back in school and expect them to sit down and learn their ABCs. We have to find other ways that will allow them to get away from being soldiers, which is the only way some can see to make a living these days. It is a big challenge to find some kind of vocational training for these boys who are now in their twenties and should be at the peak of their productive lives. Instead, they risk being dangerous blots on society.

Home life

When bourgeois urban women became refugees, many found themselves leaving modern houses and apartments for the cramped quarters of refugee camps or crowded sections of Pakistani cities. Often they lived next to rural Pakistani families whose attitudes towards women were much more conservative than those they had met in urban Afghanistan. They often responded by resolving to maintain the reputation of Afghan women in traditional ways, starting to wear the veil and head coverings just to prove to people in Pakistan that Afghans have a keen sense of honour. Like their sisters in the camps, these women also continued to pass on Afghan values for proper behaviour to their children.


A. Hollmann, UNHCR

Iran, 1990s

Living conditions in exile were especially hard for these urban women. Instead of one family per house, there were sometimes five or six families, with fifteen to thirty people living in a house designed for five or six. Rural women may have been able to recreate something of their own home atmosphere in the camps, but this was not possible for many urban women.

There are many among the urban refugees in Peshawar who would now like to go back to Afghanistan, but are staying because of their children, particularly the girls. They do not trust the situation in Afghanistan and there is practically no education for the girls. So they stay behind in order to provide opportunities for their children. And even if there is peace, much of Kabul is destroyed and these families have no homes to return to; they have no capital to use for rebuilding, having spent in Pakistan whatever savings they had.

Afghanistan's women and the future

How can we help Afghan women from now on?

First, I should like to summarize what I personally think are the main patterns we have to deal with.

Number one. The differences between the rural and the urban are considerable. The interconnections between women's and men's roles is stronger in the rural areas than it is in the cities. Therefore, I think that today we have to concentrate on the urban women. The rural women have problems we must deal with, but there has been a tendency to forget about the more complex problems of urban women. The history of the last few years has shown that we have to watch out for what is happening in the urban areas, or the women there will be in great trouble.

Number two. The women's movement in Afghanistan is only about 100 years old, and it was originally initiated and supported by men. As I have said before, women never had to fight for the vote or the right to work, unlike their sisters in many other parts of the world. But today, there is no government support. Furthermore, whatever support is being given is delivered in a very scattered manner.

Number three. Because the government of the 1950s insisted that the removal of the veil and the emergence of women in public should be voluntary, traditional patriarchal social attitudes remained. We must not therefore blame Islam: we have to look much deeper into Afghan social traditions. Afghan women are part of their families, they do not want to upset the family and they do not like to undertake aggressive leadership roles. To assert themselves in public is not the polite, ladylike thing for Afghan women to do.

B. K. Bangash, AP



Torkham border crossing, 1990s

These are the major patterns we have seen in history. What we have to contend with now is the fact that a very conservative attitude towards women is emerging. This was true during the time of the *jihad* when the *mujahidin* were in control; since the rise of the Taliban it is even more so. The Taliban have stated that they wish to establish a pure, Islamic state, and that women have no place in the public arena. They are required to stay at home and take care of their husbands and children.

We must not underestimate the value attached to female purity. Every time a new group comes to power in Afghanistan, it has to present itself as the protector and arbiter of women's behaviour, and as being made up of good Muslims. This is something we have to understand – even if we believe that the results of what is often largely rhetoric are often extremely negative for women.

In the Taliban areas of Afghanistan there are Taliban and there are Taliban. There is everything from the most conservative fanatics to rational moderates. There is no unanimous policy, so what you can and cannot do depends on where you are. The group is still not legitimate in the eyes of many Afghans, and they know that. They cling to the symbol of the protected woman, because to their minds this means that they may be seen as being good Muslims.

One Afghan woman friend of mine made a very pertinent observation: "The Taliban have been brought up in religious schools, *madrassas*. They

were taken there when they were young, and they stayed there day and night. They were taught by ultra-conservative mullahs, who told them that woman is nothing but a distraction. She is a sexual being, whose only objective in life is to distract a man from his religious studies. Keep away from them, keep them locked up so you do not have to look at them." This is what they are taught in their schools. And, as my friend had observed, when they go home they do not know how to interact with women any more. They do not know how to talk to their sisters, their cousins or their aunts. They are just afraid of women.

I am myself convinced that reality will force the Taliban to change their policy and the restrictions for women, even if they try to insist upon a very strict dress code. I doubt that their current stance can last. When the Taliban came in, they said all the right things. They were going to establish an Islamic state, they were going to end corruption and they were going to collect all the guns. They said all Afghans were brothers, and there would be no discrimination between ethnic groups or between Sunni and Shia. That is what they said, but they keep making mistakes. They keep showing that they do not really believe what they say. They are not tolerant. And one of the things Afghans are at heart is tolerant. If somebody wants to dress a different way or worship in a different way – that has always been accepted. This is the basic Afghan characteristic.



A. Kearney

Rushtaq, 1998

What is being done?

Rethinking assistance to women

The aid providers are walking a very fine line, trying to follow international standards of women's rights without stepping on the sensitivities of a national culture.

There are many different types of aid programme. Predictably, most of them are in the health sector, and there is a lot of training of basic health workers. I do not know how solid this training is. In many cases the training is for short periods. Short termism is a widespread problem. One of the big weaknesses in aid efforts directed at women is that women's projects do not generally have enough follow-up. The tendency is to train somebody and then go off and leave her to her own devices. If you teach someone to prune trees or to make soap or whatever, and then go away without leaving anything behind, either some written material or a two-legged advisor, a lot of effort just dissipates. You have to stick with your projects, and always provide some very simple reading material.

Another problem is that it is useless to start a women's project without getting the cooperation of the men first. This is ignored so many times, and then there are problems. If the men do not understand what you are doing with the women, they are going to come up with some bizarre ideas. I remember a health project among the refugees where the women had six weeks of basic health training. At the end of the training each graduate was given a plastic basin and a cake of soap. Immediately, the men were grumbling: "What are they doing in there? They are training our women to be prostitutes! Why else would they need a basin and a bar of soap?!" Men come up with these bizarre ideas because they do not understand. If you are going to teach the importance of basic personal hygiene, like washing your hands before eating, you are going to need soap. If the women cannot go to the bazaar to buy soap, you must depend on the men of the household to do it. And if he does not understand the importance of it, he is not going to buy the

A. Kearney



Takhar, 1998

soap. The emphasis must be on the whole family, not on individuals. This would seem to be a very simple, obvious observation, but it is one that has been ignored so many times, with dire consequences for the programmes.

Another day I witnessed women being taught basic healthcare. The classes were given in a house, which was absolutely spotless. But to get there you had to walk through the most awful, unsanitary mess outside. When I mentioned this to the women, they explained that they were responsible only for the private spaces; the public spaces were the responsibility of the men. But the men had not been included in these basic health lessons. You are not going to accomplish anything by targeting half the population, when there are things that half the population can not do. It must be a community approach.

In education, there is an ongoing battle about curricula and textbooks. Many of the books produced for use in Afghan schools carry warlike messages: "Two Kalashnikovs plus two Kalashnikovs are how many Kalashnikovs?", or, "If you kill three Russians and I kill four Russians, how many dead Russians are there?" Aid agencies are trying to remove this kind of message from textbooks, but we are running into all kinds of problems. The Taliban do not want us to "take the *jihad* out of school books." They say they are still fighting the *jihad* and need those messages.

Hundreds of teachers have been trained by NGOs, but there is currently no institutional capacity to absorb all these teachers. Many of them are therefore forgetting or losing interest, and then a lot of the effort and the money goes to waste. There is a tremendous amount of waste when people get enthusiastic and start a project without coordinating it with anything or anyone else. Then again, sometimes the political situation changes, or something else happens. It is obviously not easy working under such unstable conditions.

Providing aid to Afghanistan at this time is very difficult. This is most apparent when it comes to income-generating projects for women. As I have said, there has been a tremendous focus on embroidery and tailoring, and only now are we getting into providing capital or credit. I have been asking for credit schemes for women for a long time, and I have been told not even to think of such a thing. Nonetheless, the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee has a project which is working very well, even if it is just a test and affects very few people. UNHCR has picked up my plea for credit for women, and aims to experiment with a system that has become very popular and successful in Bangladesh.

More and more, interest is shifting away from handicrafts. Now there are a wide variety of projects, such as food processing, poultry, and fisheries. Unfortunately, many are short-term projects. To succeed, many of these experiments require a change in attitude that will take time to achieve. One reason why these are often short-lived projects is that there is a lack of long-term funding.

There are a great number of disabled women in Afghanistan. To become disabled is something that changes your life, whether you are a man or a woman, but for an Afghan woman it is a terrible tragedy. The chance of getting married if you are a disabled woman is practically nil. It is therefore important to come up with ideas that will give these women a place in the society that is not necessarily focused on motherhood.

D. Drenner

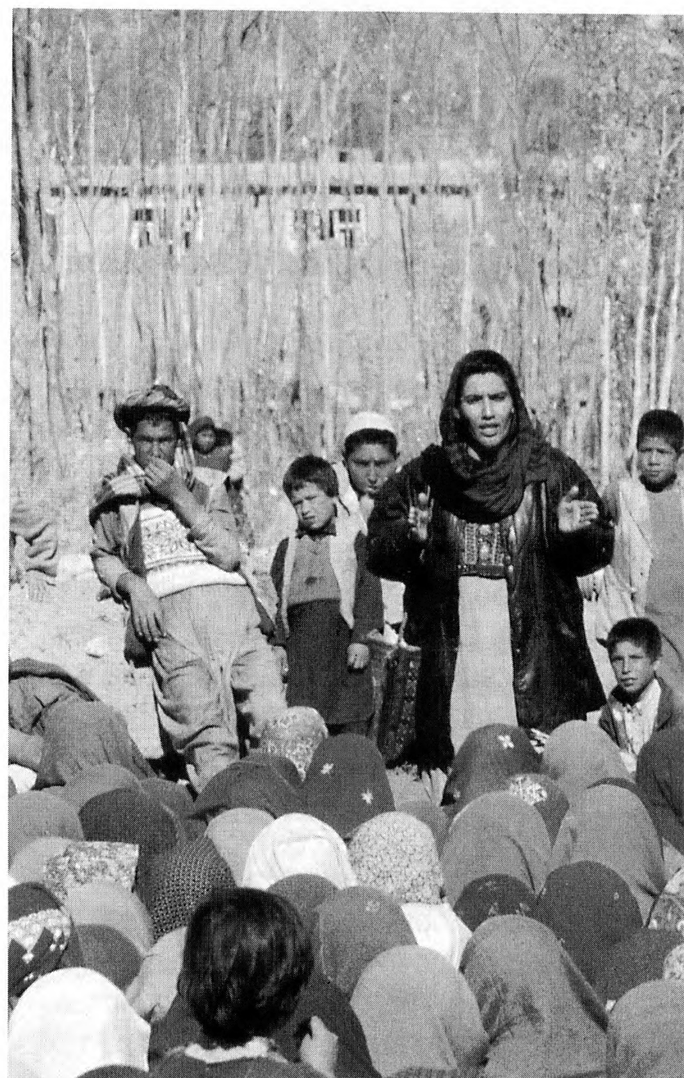


Central Highlands, 1990s

Leadership

One could go on talking a great deal about exactly what is being carried out today, but the important thing is: what can we learn from these projects, their strengths and their limitations, for the future? I think the main thing is that somehow we have to develop leadership within the various communities, whether urban or rural. To be able to take these opportunities and expand them within their own communities, women need leadership training from the bottom upwards.

It is easier to train for leadership among educated women who are used to thinking beyond the family. It is not so easy, however, to set up mechanisms that enable these women to go out into areas where they need to pass on their expertise. This is a big problem for which I have no immediate solution.


S. Reynolds, UNCHS

Northern Afghanistan, 1990s

Efforts have been made. UNDP set up an advisory group on gender. It consisted of between ten and fifteen women, half of them foreigners, half Afghans. The foreigners did all the talking. Only when you asked one of the Afghan women a direct question would she come forth with her observations. This is symptomatic of the leadership problems. Women have to learn to raise their voices. We have tried to establish women's networks in Peshawar and there are some very capable women there. But unfortunately, partly because of societal attitudes and partly because of the refugee situation, there is a very hard-core groupishness. You can get women within a certain group to work and talk together, but it all breaks down if you try to get these groups linked together – unless some outsider is there to lead them. And that should not be the way. There should be some Afghan women willing to assume leadership but I do not see this as yet and it is difficult to know how to develop this sense of responsibility. We are working on it, but the women tend to be suspicious towards other groups, and, nobody wants to be associated with "unladylike behaviour" – which taking up decisive leadership roles is considered to be by many Afghans.

Innovation and relevance

I think there is a big potential in the satellite villages surrounding Kabul, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif and so on. They have their links with the cities, and this is where you may be able to at least experiment with types of women's organizations in the rural areas.

The field is wide open, but we need vision. We need new ideas and we must be willing to be laughed at. I have a crazy idea: I am trying to push for women to grow flowers in these satellite villages around Kabul. Flowers are not basic essentials, I am told, but even now flowers are sold in the market in Kabul. And beyond the market in Kabul, there are flights every day from Kabul to Dubai. There are not many flowers in the Gulf States, so women could grow flowers in the vicinity of Kabul and build up some very good businesses.

The Afghans themselves have many interesting ideas that they are trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to find funding for, such as reforestation nurseries managed by women. Unfortunately donors have worn blinkers for a long time. They have been concentrating on health and education, very little else. But with this new emphasis on gender, they are widening their thinking. One of these days we might see a women's flower business exporting to the Gulf States and women managing reforestation. Who knows?

One has to be imaginative and listen to the women, because they come up with some great ideas. Many agencies are supporting candle making or soap making projects, but I am not sure that these are very useful. You can buy good soap already, so I do not think that is sustainable. Candle making is great fun, but I have observed that once the original raw materials supplied by the NGO run out, the women do not try to get any more. This means that either there is no real need for candles, or that it is not profitable enough to be worth the effort.

"Women's equality must be a central component of any attempt to solve the world's social, economic and political problems."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan
International Women's Day, 1997

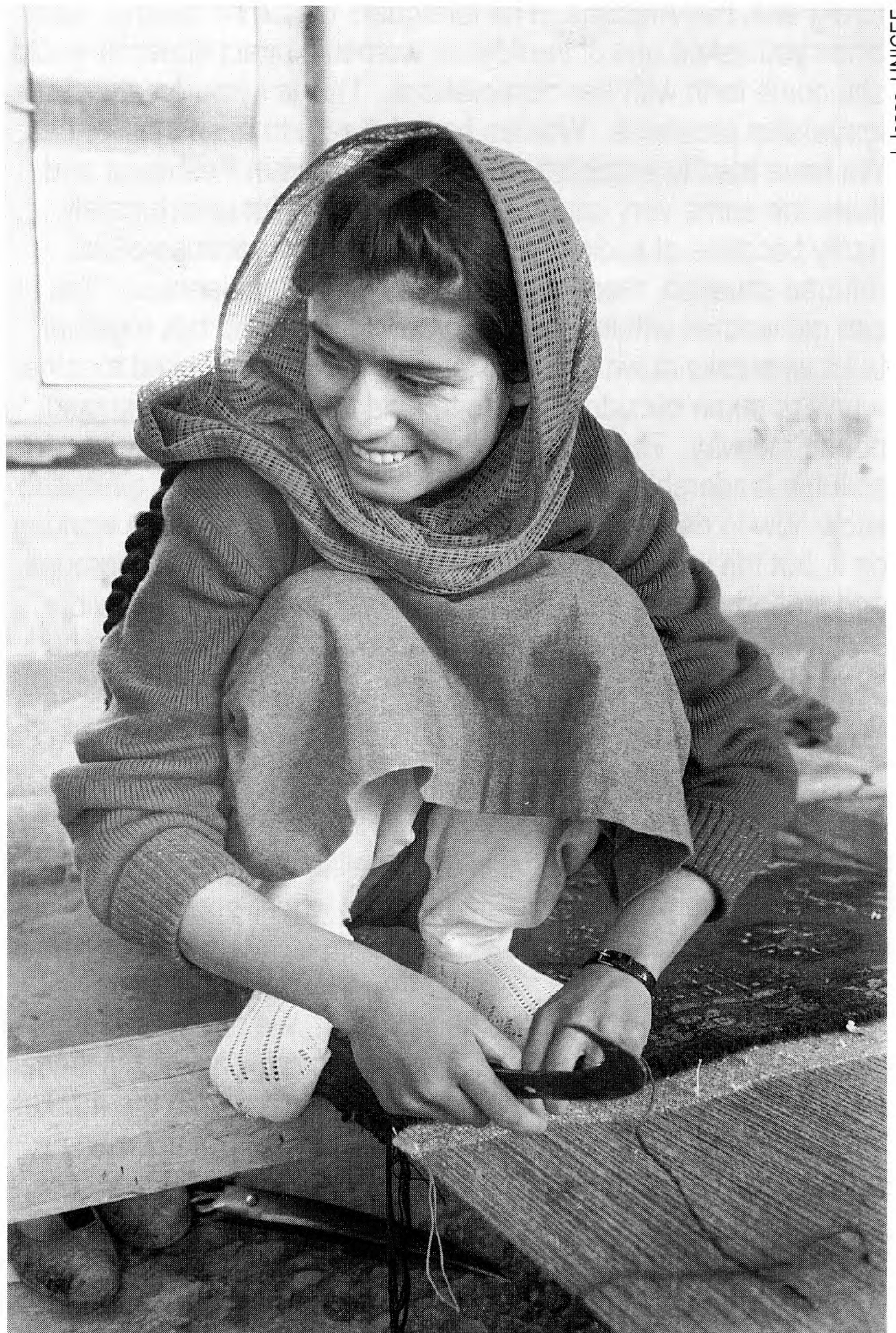
One major effort is to train educated women to go out into the countryside and listen to what the women want. In the past no educated woman from Kabul was interested in working outside the city. Urban women believed rural women were stupid, superstitious and impossible to teach. The refugee experience has increased the respect among educated people for those living in rural areas. In the refugee camps it has become obvious how strong rural women really are. They have taken charge of difficult situations. They make do, they are imaginative and they are willing and quick to learn. Give the rural woman an idea that she thinks is useful for herself or for her children, and she will pick it up.

Let me end with a personal experience from the time I was living in a village in northern Afghanistan. A woman visited me and brought with her a baby with gummed-up eyes. She wanted penicillin ointment, but I did not have any. I told her to go home and make some very strong tea. She went home, and I arrived later to find several neighbours laughing their heads off saying: "We go and ask her for help, and she wants strong tea!" We washed the baby's eyes in the strong tea and I told them to keep bathing the eyes several times during the day. Two days later they returned with the baby's wonderful big eyes clear – there is nothing more beautiful than Afghan babies' eyes – and said: "Look, what has happened!" I explained that tea contains tannic acid, better than penicillin.

Several weeks later there was a funeral. I was sitting way in the back and a woman made her way through the crowd towards me. She was carrying a baby who could not open its eyes. She sat down in front of me and before she could open her mouth we heard a chorus of "Tannic acid, tannic acid! Go make some strong tea." It was a simple thing, but it met their needs and they readily accepted it. Rural women will take what they see as useful, they will not accept messages they do not find necessary for their own experiences.

The next few years are going to be difficult. We are going to find doors slammed in our faces quite often. But we in the international community should be there. When the opportunity arises, we must be there to support Afghan women.




J. Isaac, UNICEF

Northern Afghanistan, 1990s

Life in Afghanistan before the war

Kabul

Life in general

The city of Kabul became the official Afghan capital in 1776. By the 1970s, settlement patterns within what is now known as the "old city" had not changed very much. This part of the city was divided into self-contained blocks, or wards – ethnically, geographically, religiously or kin-oriented sections where social cohesiveness was particularly strong.

Women living in the old city mostly lived in tight confinement. Houses were all built around courtyards, looking inwards. Even in the 1970s many women, particularly middle and lower class women, seldom left their homes without a male escort, even to go shopping. Their husbands, brothers, and sons went out to work in government offices, factories, etc. The women in their homes knew little about the work their men were doing. As a result, there was little interaction between the men and their families on matters other than domestic issues. A city-dwelling woman's role was primarily to take care of her man and her children. In the rural areas the pattern was very different, as we shall see later.

Courtly influences

The first spokesman for women's rights was Amir Abdur Rahman who came to the throne in Kabul in 1880. Known as the Iron Amir, Abdur Rahman was widely disliked for his autocratic ways. Nevertheless, he did speak out for women. Using the dictates of the Koran, he forbade child marriages and forced marriages and he supported inheritance and divorce rights for women. He also, however, imposed the death penalty for adultery. He was firm in his conviction that the behaviour of women symbolized the nation's honour, as well as family honour. He believed, therefore, that women must be well protected and kept in seclusion, away from the hostile outside world where they might be subjected to experiences that would bring dishonour to the family.

Amir Abdur Rahman's son, Amir Habibullah, succeeded him in 1901. Although not very concerned about the rights of women, Habibullah did inadvertently take a step that forwarded the women's movement. Soon after coming to the throne he announced an amnesty for families exiled by his father, encouraging them to return. Some of the exiled families were living in India. One was the famous Musahiban family. Habibullah invited the family back, and to cement his good will he took one of the Musahiban sisters as his fourth wife. Ulya Jenab had grown up in India and was a very elegant young lady who dressed only in western clothes. She was an accomplished writer and translated Urdu works into Dari. This made her a new phenomenon in Kabul's harems at that time. Because she was a gentle character with no political ambitions, Ulya Jenab did not cause many waves in society, but she did plant the seed of the idea of education for women.



Dupree Collection

Khyryias, 1909

Amir Habibullah's second wife, Ulya Hazrat, on the other hand, was a very strong woman from a prominent tribal family in Kandahar. Ulya Hazrat typifies the power of the harem. Her son, Amanullah, would later come to the throne over his elder brother, due in great part to the machinations of his mother. Not only did she rule her own harem, Ulya Hazrat's voice carried authority throughout the court. Nevertheless, she stayed mostly within her harem walls and when moving in public she was veiled and escorted by males from her household.

Another family that returned from exile came from the west. Mahmud Beg Tarzi, a famous writer and editor of a leading

newspaper, had spent his youth as an exile in Syria. There he was influenced by the Young Turk Movement, which was then discussing the idea of women's emancipation and public participation. Tarzi and his Syrian wife came back to Kabul around 1904 and immediately began to speak strongly about the need for education and work opportunities for women. He published several articles in his newspaper, the *Seraj-ul-Akhbar*, about famous women in other parts of the world so as to explain how women could be a dynamic force in a nation's development.

Dupree Collection



Queen Soraya hunting

Tarzi had great influence at court. Two of his daughters married Amir Habibullah's sons. These women were very fashion-conscious and dressed exclusively in western styles. They ordered many outfits from India, but they also employed a seamstress to design western dresses for the younger women at court. From now on (that is from about 1906) western dress gradually came to symbolize education and emancipation for women. The wedding of Tarzi's daughter Khayriya and Habibullah's eldest son Inayatullah was a grand affair. Anyone who has been to an Afghan wedding has seen the elaborate white western wedding gowns that are worn by Afghan city brides, in complete contrast to the colourful wedding gowns of India, Pakistan or any other country in the area. This tradition began with the wedding of Khayriya and Inayatullah.

The newlywed Khayriya and Inayatullah also introduced the novel concept of monogamy. Amir Habibullah had four, sometimes five or six wives and was constantly pressuring Inayatullah to take more wives in order to further his father's political negotiations. The young couple refused. The Amir found this very strange. In addition to his four official wives the Amir had numerous other women in his harem, and fathered 23 sons and 25 daughters – all of whom were accorded full legitimate status. But the Prince and Princess remained adamant. They devoted themselves to caring for their own large family of thirteen, and Khayriya's life was focussed mainly on the decoration and management of her home.

The children in these royal and court families were kept within their mothers' *haremserais* without much contact with the outside world. They grew up with western-oriented ideas. Their dress, even their toys were western. This meant that they were never given opportunities to appreciate the values of the countryside where 95 per cent of the Afghan population lived. As adults, therefore, they could not really relate to the dynamics that swirled around them. It was these children and their families who were eventually exiled in 1978. Many of the problems we see today are rooted in the fact that at the beginning of this century the ruling elite lost contact with the values of the countryside.

Mahmud Beg Tarzi had another daughter, Soraya. She married the Amir's third son, Amanullah, who succeeded to the throne after the assassination of his father in 1919. Whereas Khayriya and Inayatullah were basically homebodies by inclination, this new royal couple actively spoke out for women's rights, championing the removal of the veil and avidly espousing Mahmud Beg Tarzi's teachings on the need for women to participate in the nation's development. Soraya did many things that were quite revolutionary at the time. She went horseback riding, motored to picnics with her sisters, hunted with her husband, and, with the King, spoke in favour of women's rights at public meetings.

Education

Most importantly, Queen Soraya was the patroness of the first girls' school in Afghanistan. The school was established in 1921 with Tarzi's wife, Rasmiya, as its principal.

Dupree Collection



Queen Soraya in court gown

The first graduates of this school were sent to Turkey to receive a higher education in nursing. This was a truly controversial act. Conservatives in the society thought that formal secular education for girls was bad enough. Advanced education was an unheard of idea, and even worse was the fact that these girls were being sent overseas without male family escorts, in order to prepare themselves for careers. The concept of careers for women was distasteful to many, and there were a lot of discontented rumblings. But the royal couple's determination was strong and the students left for Turkey in October 1928. Trained nurses were needed in Afghanistan's first hospital for women, which also opened at this time.


Dupree Collection

Turkey, 1928

"Westernization"

So the King and Queen practised what they preached. They did not believe that women had to be confined to their homes, and the Queen frequently spoke out in public. In the hill resort of Paghman above Kabul, at the time of a big Loya Jirgah (general assembly) in 1928, she addressed a large mixed audience dressed in a short skirt. Nevertheless, she did not feel ready to appear without something over her face at such a public gathering which included rural and tribal delegates from all over Afghanistan. Instead she, like the other ladies of the court, wore a very fine chiffon veil tacked to the brim of her stylish cloche hat. Numerous British journalists, present on the occasion, observed that these diaphanous veils were much more provocative than no veils at all.

Afghan women have always been very fashion conscious, and they still are. In the 1920s, gossip began to circulate in the bazaars about the women at court. The word was that the royal ladies were going around almost naked, with skirts above the knees and no sleeves. This was, after all, the Flapper Era in Europe. They even cut their hair, which was particularly shocking. Many Afghans looked upon these developments as patently un-Islamic.

In 1927-28, while the King and Queen were on a grand tour of Europe, Egypt, Iran and the Soviet Union, a postcard showing the Queen with bobbed hair and wearing a sleeveless gown was printed by the thousands and distributed widely throughout the tribal areas. While the fall of King Amanullah cannot be solely attributed to his Queen's hairstyle and revealing clothing, her appearance was certainly a spark that set the tribal areas ablaze against the King and his reform programmes in general.

The fall of Amanullah

The uprising against King Amanullah led by Bacha Saqqao took place in November 1928. Following the monarch's banishment, the situation became very much as it is now. All vestiges of women's programmes were forbidden. The girls' school was closed. Women were not allowed to cut their hair or wear western dress, and they were told to stay at home. This sounds very familiar to those who are working in Afghanistan today. Bacha Saqqao's reign lasted for only nine months, however, before he was toppled by Nadir Shah, one of Ulya Jenab's Musahiban brothers, who had returned from exile in India during the reign of Amir Habibullah.

It was to be 30 years before women could appear in public unveiled. This happened in 1959 when Nadir Shah's

Sardar Enayatullah and children


Dupree Collection

son, King Zahir, and his government announced the voluntary end of female seclusion and removal of the veil. They did not decree that this must be done. They left it to individual families to decide whether women should come out or not. The key here was their emphasis on the voluntary acceptance of the end of seclusion and removal of the veil.

The '60s and '70s

King Zahir's Prime Minister, Daud Khan, also from the Musahiban family, was convinced that women must contribute to national development. By 1959, considerable progress had been made on the women's front. There were now excellent schools for girls. There were medical facilities for women, where women were trained not only in nursing skills, but also in administration.



Dupree Collection

Kabul, 1965

When the government announced its support for women to come out in public, therefore, these women were prepared. They were intellectually and technically ready to take their places in a variety of positions. From then on women were to be found in all government offices and following many other careers. In fact, by 1978, women could, at least in theory, follow virtually any career they chose. There were women in the police force, in the army, in business, in industry and in all government departments. The only thing that was denied women, at least in the towns and cities, was manual labour. In India, women may be seen at construction sites carrying cement or bricks on their heads, or sweeping the streets. You would never see an urban Afghan woman doing these chores. These were not considered honourable jobs for women; not only would such work dishonour the woman, but it would also dishonour the man who allowed her to do such work.

Once again, all this was voluntary. The government facilitated, but it used no force. And the women themselves chose a variety of options. Some women chose to open up boutiques or hairdressing salons within the confines of the compounds where they lived. That way they were halfway out, but still protected by their family environment. In the 1970s Kabul had some very exclusive boutiques, and you could get your hair done on almost every other corner. Other women were studying and teaching and acting as judges in the Family Court, where most of the cases had to do with the custody of children, divorce and other family issues.

Families who continued to prefer that their women still wear the veil were allowed to do so. They were influenced by patriarchal views that prevailed in Afghan society long before Islam was introduced. There is a tendency to blame Islam for what is happening to women in Afghanistan today. Islam, however, is essentially a very egalitarian system. It all depends on how one interprets the injunctions in the Koran. For many years, and in many societies, male interpretations of what a good Muslim woman can and cannot do have been layered on top of patriarchal beliefs. In Afghan society, there are people who believe in conservative interpretations, as well as others who are very moderate. These people will say that the Koran does not insist that women must be cooped up at home, nor need to be shrouded in veils and always accompanied by male relatives when they go out in public.



Kabul, 1970s

By the 1970s, many young middle and upper-class Kabuli women took for granted the right to move in public anywhere they wished. They regarded education as their natural right. They studied at university and prepared themselves for full-fledged careers. Kabul was a fun city with all kinds of restaurants and jazz clubs. Bourgeois women became increasingly western-oriented. They looked towards moving away from extended family living and wanted to set up their own nuclear families. But many ended up being frustrated by the still prevalent strong patriarchal beliefs that controlled major decisions in life, particularly about whom they should marry and what, if any, career they should follow.

Social interactions continued to be primarily within family networks, very rarely including non-family members from their work environments.

The 1970s were also a time of political unrest in Kabul and women's issues became embroiled in the ferment. The leftists claimed that everything the government provided for women was a sham – cosmetic gestures purporting to achieve true rights for women that achieved nothing of real substance. There were no true reforms for women, they claimed, because decision-making remained the prerogative of male family members. The leftists blamed the government, but the real problem was those old patriarchal attitudes within the society at large.

The religious conservatives, for their part, claimed that Afghanistan was heading towards sexual anarchy since women were provocatively wearing mini-skirts and hot-pants on the streets of Kabul. For the first time since the 1880s, when their power was reined in by Amir Abdur Rahman, and the brief resurgence in 1929, the religious institutions raised their voices. There were demonstrations, particularly on the Kabul University campus. Some conservatives rode around on bicycles, throwing acid on bareheaded women wearing short skirts and lipstick. These incidents brought women out into the streets to demonstrate for the first time as a group.

The political tensions that had been building up throughout the 1970s finally erupted with the leftist coup d'état of April 1978. This led to a mass exodus, and changed women's lives drastically.

Up to this point, Afghan women had been given their rights. They had not had to fight for their cause, there had been no suffragette movement. They had come out of their homes and taken off their veils because male leaders had, of their own volition, decreed they could do so. The constitution gave them the right to vote, the right to education, the right to work. A male-dominated government and parliament passed this constitution guaranteeing women all these rights. A male dominated society was later to take them away.



Dupree Collection

Girls' demonstration, 1970

Women in the countryside

The family factor

Life in the countryside was, and is, very different. Ninety-five per cent of Afghanistan's women live in rural villages. Much of the country is dominated by mountains, which means there are many villages in remote areas, beyond the reach of major road systems. These remote mountain villages are small and usually occupied by one kin-oriented segment. Most inhabitants are therefore related to each other. Because they are essentially living as one extended family group, women have a lot more freedom of movement than women living in Kabul and other cities. This, and the fact that they are largely insulated from the hostile outside world, gives these women a sense of security that is rare in urban areas.


UNHCR

Eastern Afghanistan, 1980s

On the plains, the villages are larger and follow the pattern of Kabul. They are organized in wards, which are largely kin-oriented. Women move freely within these family units. It will often happen that some women emerge as natural leaders, who are able to pass from one section to another. These women can be used to assist in delivering various types of aid because they already have their own networks based on trust. However, when an aid organization enlists such natural leaders, gives them training and, for instance, medical supplies, this may reduce her effectiveness as a leader because she is now seen as contaminated by association with outsiders. The bond of trust is broken and her capacity to help people can be diminished. This is something that the aid community should probably look into more deeply.

The rural woman's haven

Domestic architecture in the countryside is designed to protect women from the outside world. A family compound typically has only one entrance, which leads directly into the section where males entertain their guests. Here young boys learn politeness, how to serve guests and other niceties of etiquette. Only one door leads from this male, public preserve into the women's section.


A. Kearney

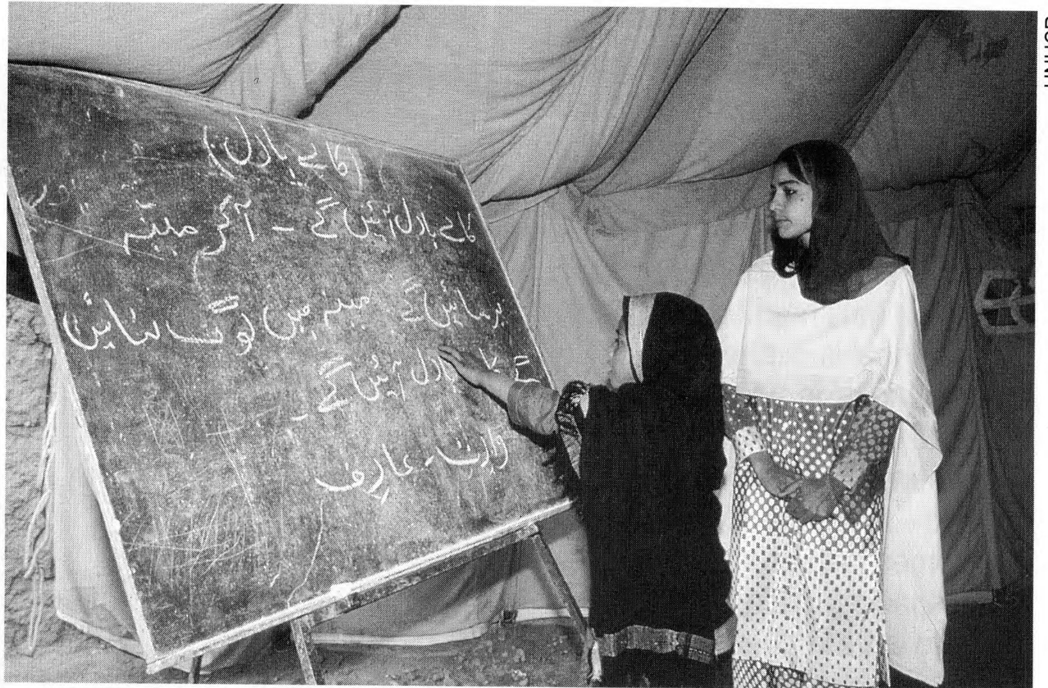
Northern Afghanistan, 1990s

Much has been written about poor rural women who are confined to only one section of their homes, but I must emphasize that this special space is very important for women. This is the only place where they can be themselves, and this is where you see the real interaction between men and women. In public, both men and women behave in ways society tells them is proper. The woman walks behind the man; very modestly, without speaking. But in the privacy of the women's rooms, a lot of bantering and teasing goes on between men and women.

This is not say that every rural family in Afghanistan has an ideal home life. There are battered women and battered men in every society. But the stereotypes perpetuated by outsiders present Afghan rural women as ignorant chattels, living lives of drudgery from morning until night. Formulated largely by male anthropologists from information supplied by male informants, these stereotypes have been repeated and repeated over the years. I read them all before going to Afghanistan. Then, when my archaeologist husband took me into the villages – we never lived in Indiana Jones-type archaeological camps, we always lived in village houses – I began to see the strength and confidence of most village women. What I saw and experienced bore no resemblance to the stereotypes I had read about.

Interconnected roles

One of the reasons why women in villages are self-assured is because they know their roles are essential to the well being of the entire family. And the men know it as well.



UNHCR

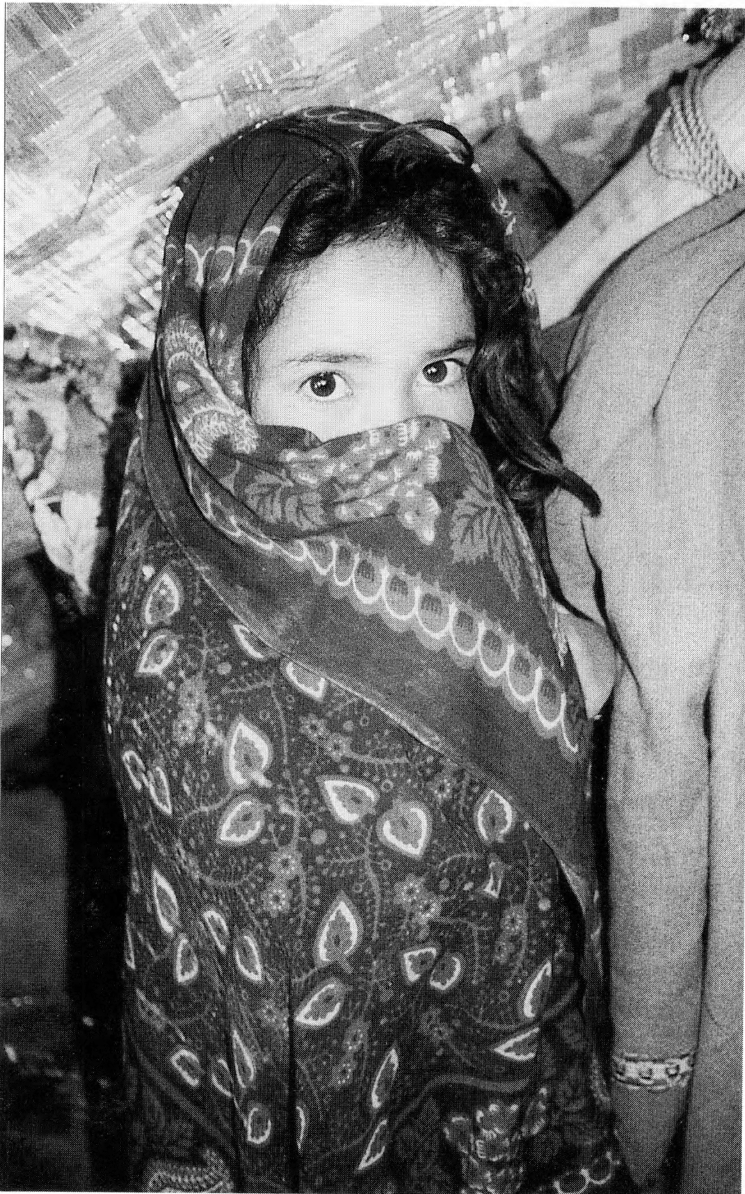
North West Frontier Province, 1994

In rural areas, unlike in towns and cities, men's and women's roles are closely interconnected.

The men plough the fields and sow the seed, and they do the heavy harvesting. But the lighter tasks, for instance picking beans, cotton, walnuts, and melons, are done by women. The melon-picking season is looked upon particularly as a time of enjoyable outings in the fields, and the women look forward to it. After the crops are in, some go to the bazaar to be sold for cash, the rest are kept to feed the family through the winter. It is the women who manage these supplies until the next harvest comes in. If the woman does not manage her food stocks properly, the family goes into debt or starves. The role of management of food supplies is something that many of us forget. Rural women are eminently capable, and usually it is the older women in the household who are in charge of doling out supplies day by day so they will not run out before the new stocks come in.

The clearest example of male/female interdependence is found among groups that weave carpets. The men herd and shear the sheep. The women spin the wool into yarn. Then it is given back to the men, for dyeing. Then back it goes to the women, who weave the carpet. Finally, the end product goes back to the men, who do the marketing. With inter-connectedness such as this, with one depending on the other, a mutual respect develops naturally. Each family member knows that one cannot survive without the other. This contrasts markedly with the urban situation, where the man goes out to an office or to a factory, and the woman stays at home. As a result, the bonds of understanding between urban men and women are less close.

Northern Afghanistan, 1990s



A. Kearney

However, the major role for women in the rural areas, as it is in urban areas, is marriage and motherhood. Marriage is so extremely important that much effort is put into wedding preparations, especially in making a wide variety of embroidered items, ranging from dresses to spoon holders. When the bride moves into the home of her new husband, the women of the household will examine every piece of embroidery with most critical eyes. The better the embroidery, the higher her status. Her treatment by her in-laws, her future happiness lies in the quality of her work.

A woman's handiwork is a symbol of personal esteem. Any thought of having to sell a piece of this work in public bazaars is looked upon with horror and pity. No man would take a piece of embroidery made by a woman in his household to the bazaar, unless he was really in dire financial need. It is important to keep this in mind when discussing income-generating activities such as those that have been introduced by the NGOs. Projects for women refugees have been heavily focused on handiwork for sale. In some circles it is accepted because the money is so necessary, but it is doubtful it can

be sustained over the longer term when the refugees return home. Aid organizations may, therefore, have to re-study and perhaps re-focus their income-generating activities for women.

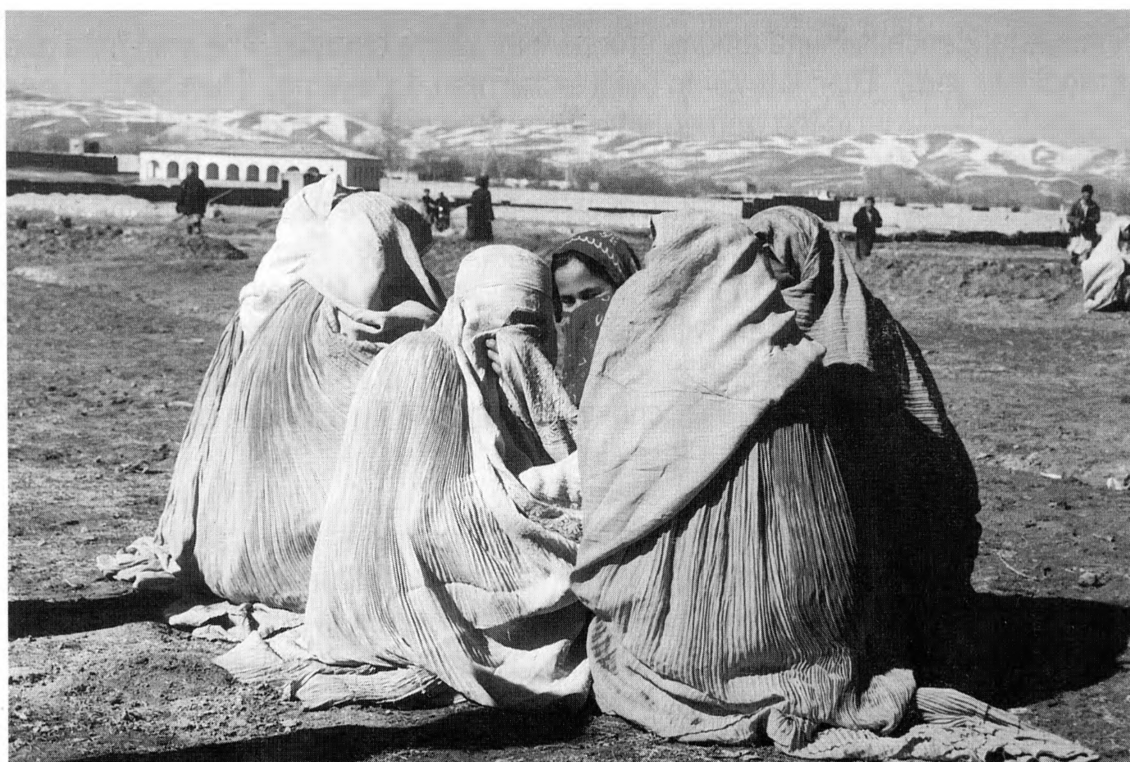
I must emphasize that although a woman's economic contribution to her family's wellbeing is often vital, this is of secondary importance to her status as a wife and mother. A woman's status improves primarily when she gets married; and her ultimate goal is motherhood. A childless home is a calamity for both men and women. Mothers are often very young, and they have many children – too many. Before the war, the women in the rural areas knew about spacing children, even if they did have large families. The refugee exodus, however, has played havoc with the birth rate.



B. K. Bangash, AP

Kabul, 1990s

A. Kearney



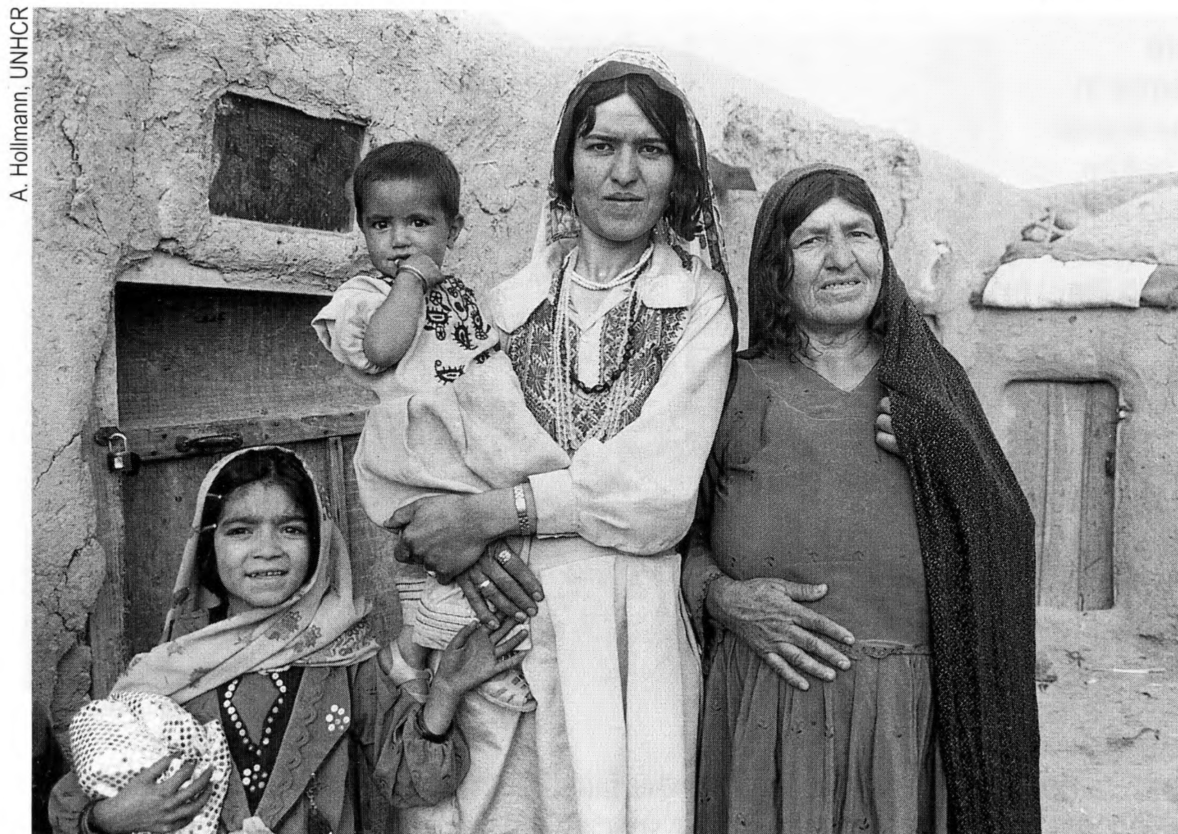
Takhar, 1998

Women in flight

Life as a refugee

In December 1979, Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union and millions fled to Iran and Pakistan. The peak occurred in 1981, when 4,700 people crossed the border into Pakistan every day.

Rural women, who were used to freedom of movement within their villages, suddenly found themselves confined in refugee camps with no space of their own. Many of them told me about the physical hardships: temperatures up to 45 degrees, no water, and no shade, dust and shortages of fuel and food. But the worst thing, they said, was the psychological need to have a modicum of privacy. And there was no privacy in the original refugee camps.



A. Hollmann, UNHCR

Iran, 1993

Eventually the refugees could stand it no longer, and began to build their own houses. Women played a part in this, although for many, particularly those who had come from the cities, this was a new activity. It was the first time they had done this kind of manual work. Some of the younger urban women seemed to enjoy it, but it was a bizarre experience nonetheless.

At the height of the exodus, there were 3.5 million Afghan refugees living in three provinces of Pakistan. The ecology in these areas is very fragile, and resources are scarce. The refugees and the local inhabitants competed for water, firewood, and grazing for their flocks. Relations were often potentially hostile, and it was the women who had to go out and negotiate to get their basic necessities.

One of the great underpublicized aspects of the refugee situation in Pakistan is that there were no major outbreaks of violence between the Afghans and the local inhabitants. This was remarkable, since Pushtun tempers on both sides of the border are noted for their volatility, and their propensity to explode at the least suggestion of any intrusion on family honour. The lack of violence speaks well for two things: Pushtunwali, the Pushtun code of ethics, which requires every Pushtun to help other Pushtuns in times of stress, and, Islam, which enjoins every Muslim to help fellow Muslims in trouble. These two principles proved highly effective, and both sides, Afghan and Pakistani, lived up to the recognized obligations of the host for a guest and a guest for the host.

Eventually, the refugees created large villages that were indistinguishable from their homes in Afghanistan. Now the women could feel more confident and secure, but they also had to face new problems and learn to cope with things in new ways. Many men were away fighting in the *jihad*, so women had to make decisions which would normally have been made jointly or by men alone.

The women were well aware that they were regarded as symbols of their nation's honour, and that they and their children must behave in ways that did not disgrace the name of Afghanistan. Many Pakistanis looked for every opportunity to denounce the Afghans as barbarians, but Afghan refugee women have maintained a high reputation for their honourable behaviour.

Linked with this is the remarkable fact that very few young Afghans in the camps use drugs, although conditions are most favourable for the development of a drug culture: too much free time, an uncertain future, easily available drugs


The Women of Afghanistan
by Nancy Hatch Dupree
ZENITH